

The Seventh Commandment

“You Shall Not Steal.”

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Man has a strict right to acquire and to own property. He needs it for his own support and for the support of his family. He needs it to make provision for the future, to which, as a rational being, he is urged by the law of nature itself.

OWNERSHIP OF WORLDLY GOODS.

From the earliest times men have possessed worldly goods as their own. That which they acquired by their labour, inherited from their parents, or received as a gift from their fellow men was regarded as their own. It was necessary that each should have his own, as otherwise men could not have lived together in peace. In fact nearly all quarrels and wars, whether between nations or between people of the same community, have arisen because of the evil will of some who wished to seize unjustly what belonged to others. Most of the evils of our own day are due to injustice in some form or other.

So important for the peace and harmony of mankind is security in the possession of worldly goods that it is safeguarded by a special Commandment of God. The first three commandments deal with our duties to God. The last seven lay down our principal duties to our neighbour. They safeguard what is most important for man's peace, and for his individual and social well-being. The fourth commandment safeguards the authority of parents and the sanctity of the home. The fifth safeguards human life. The sixth defends the sanctity of marriage and the seventh commandment protects the secure possession of property honestly acquired and owned.

THEIR DISTRIBUTION.

The earth and the fulness thereof were given to mankind for the support of all. This end is generally best attained by every one having a portion for his own, which gives each an incentive to acquire his portion by honest labour, to increase it by energy and industry, to protect it with care and to expend it with economy and thrift. But the present distribution of worldly goods, according to which some have more than they need, while many have not enough to meet all their needs, does not fulfil the designs of the Creator. It does not follow however, except in so far as it is strictly necessary to preserve human life, that one can take what belongs to another on the ground that the owner has more than he needs. Such a course of action would lead to chaos and to insecurity even for the poorest, who would themselves become the victims of the thriftless and unscrupulous. It is the duty and right of the State to effect, by a gradual change, a more equitable distribution of the goods of the world in the interests of the public welfare. It can, by taxation of superfluous incomes and by progressive social legislation, make provision for the poorer classes. In addition, those who have more than they need for themselves and their families are bound to help the poor out of their superfluity. They are also bound, and this is often the best charity, to invest their superfluous

incomes in industries in their own country, producing useful goods for the community in which they live, and giving employment to their own people, thus enabling them to earn their bread by the sweat of their brows, as God intended them to do. This obligation is none the less real in that it does not bind to restitution.

COVETOUSNESS.

The tendency to take what belongs to another has been common in all the ages, before and after the commandment “You Shall Not Steal” was promulgated on Mount Sinai. It existed when the objects of exchange were food and the necessities of life. It has increased with the advent of money, which appeals to man’s rational appetite and for the possession of which he has an unlimited capacity. The old exactness and strict honesty which existed in Christian countries are not as strong as they used to be. There is no longer the same horror of taking or keeping unjustly what belongs to another. There is no longer the same exact difference between “mine” and “thine.” The opportunities for unjust taking and keeping have increased with the increase of production. The philosophies of the nations, which admit no right but might, have set a bad headline to individuals. It is indeed true that the great majority of our people have no other desire than to live honestly, to work hard, to pay their way, to depend on themselves and their own industry. They wish to be strictly honest in regard to what belongs to others as they expect others to respect in the same way what is theirs. But it is also true that an increasing number of people are tempted to acts of dishonesty. The public spirit against dishonesty seems to be growing more lax. The Christian spirit of giving to everyone his own must be renewed and strengthened. The precept enjoining strict honesty must be recognised as one of the fundamental principles of our religion and civilisation.

HONESTY.

Everyone appreciates the reputation of being an honest man. No one could have a finer character. The Sacred Scriptures sum up all the virtues in the virtue of justice. The just man is dear to God. It is a grand thing for a person or a people to have the character of being scrupulously honest, just in all their dealings, reliable and trustworthy, giving fair wages or honest work according to their condition. Honesty is an essential quality of a good Christian. Without it no one can be called a good Christian. He may observe the other commandments. He may say his prayers and hear Mass. He may even give alms, but if he is not honest, he is not a true follower of Christ. Our forefathers believed in strict honesty. May Almighty God grant that our people may be faithful and exact in their observance of this commandment, which, in His wisdom and justice, He has given us.

DISHONESTY — ITS SINFULNESS.

While honesty is respected by all right-minded people, there is no more dishonourable name than that of thief or robber. This is as it should be, because injustice contains a manifold malice. It is injurious to civil society, disturbing its peace and harmony. It causes quarrels, strife, disputes, litigation, and suspicion even of the innocent. It causes enmities which may remain for life, which extend to families and go on from generation to generation. It disturbs public order and security. Hence it has been, in past ages, punished by the severest penalties in the criminal codes of the nations. In the early days of the Church it had to be expiated by long penances, even after restitution had been made. It is injurious not only to the person wronged whose right to the peaceful possession of what is his is violated. It is injurious to the dishonest person himself, making him shifty and thriftless, sapping his energy and independence. Its chief malice is that it is an offence against God. It is a violation of one of the commandments of the law so solemnly proclaimed. It is of its nature a

grave sin. The prohibition of dishonesty in the Ten Commandments follows the prohibition of murder and adultery. Hence St. Paul states that “neither idolaters nor adulterers, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor extortioners, shall possess the kingdom of Heaven.” While injustice is, of its nature, a grave sin, in order that a grave sin be committed in individual cases, there must be grave matter as well as full advertence to the guilt and full consent of the will. There is grave matter when that which is taken or kept against the owner’s will is considerable as also when serious loss is inflicted on another by taking or damaging what is in itself of little value. The taking of a considerable amount is grave no matter from whom it is taken as it is a grave injury to the peace and security of society. The taking of a small amount is not in itself a grave sin, unless it causes grave loss to the person robbed or injured. This might be the case when a small amount is taken from a very poor person. Whether the injury be grave or light there is an obligation to restitution.

RESTITUTION.

This is the special obligation which follows sins of dishonesty and injustice. The stolen goods must be restored.

Compensation must be made for unjust injury. Restitution or at least a serious purpose of restitution is necessary for forgiveness. Other sins, even the most grievous, can be forgiven, with sincere repentance and a firm purpose of sinning no more. But injustice needs more for forgiveness than sorrow and, a firm purpose of being honest in the future. It demands restitution, when restitution is possible. The ill-gotten goods must be given back. There must be a real and serious resolve to make restitution before God grants pardon. There must be a serious effort to put this resolution into practice. Those who through their own fault do not restore ill-gotten goods or repair unjust injury, fall into the same sin again. Contrition is not sincere if it does not include a serious will to make reparation as far as possible. The Church has no power to absolve without an earnest purpose of restitution. Without this, confession is a mockery and the adding of sin to sin. Nothing can take the place of restitution, neither prayer, nor penance, nor works and piety, nor even almsdeeds, as long as the persons injured are known and it is possible to make reparation to them. Restitution should be made for the smallest as for the greatest injustice. It must be to the last farthing.

Restitution is rare and this is one of the dangers attaching to injustice. It should make everyone pause before being dishonest. Restitution is not easy. The attachment to the stolen property which moved the person to get possession of it unjustly, becomes stronger when it is in his possession. He begins to regard it as his own. He plans for the future on the strength of its possession. He gives himself or his family comforts which they are not inclined to relinquish. It is now more difficult to restore it than it was to do without it in the first instance. Perhaps he has spent the money or consumed the goods. Now he must make sacrifices and reduce his standard of living to restore them. Hence it is that restitution is comparatively rare. Men will not make the necessary sacrifice. They go even to their death without making sufficient effort to restore what they have acquired by unjust means. They place their material comfort, their social position and that of their families before the salvation of their souls. They face eternal damnation rather than make the sacrifice which restitution requires and which the law of God demands. This thought should deter everyone from injustice and dishonesty. They must make restitution. If restitution is possible there is no escape. Only a real impossibility can suspend the obligation and that only as long as the impossibility lasts. Is it not better then to be wise in time, to be strictly honest, and not to put a heavy load on your conscience — a load which only restitution can remove?

WAYS OF INJUSTICE.

It is not intended in this short pamphlet to deal fully with the manifold ways in which injustice may be committed.

This would require a volume. Besides it is not necessary. Our peoples' instinct in this matter is generally sound. They know when they are committing sins of injustice. They may excuse themselves on the ground that others are doing the same and seem to have no scruple about it. But they know in their hearts that they are doing wrong. They are not easy in their consciences. In serious illnesses or danger of death it begins to worry them. We shall therefore confine ourselves to the chief ways in which injustice may be committed, namely unjust taking or keeping what belongs to another and unjust injury to his property.

UNJUST TAKING.

It is unlawful to take another's goods unjustly and against the owner's will, that is to say, when he has every reason and right, to be unwilling to be deprived of them. No injustice is committed when the owner is willing, or when his consent can be prudently presumed, or even when he unjustly refuses. Thus one may take another's goods, against the owner's will, when he needs them for the preservation of his life, provided that he takes only what is necessary to meet this pressing and extreme need. The preservation of human life is the primary purpose of all earthly goods. So also if money or value, which is in the possession of another, clearly and certainly belongs to you, and if you can get possession of it by no other means, you can take it secretly. This method of compensation should however be resorted to only rarely. No one is a good judge in his own case. Outside these cases it is unjust and unlawful to take what belongs to another against his will. It is unjust whether the injustice is done secretly by theft or openly and violently by robbery; whether it is committed in public or private business, in buying, selling or exchange of goods in any form; whether it is by the use of false weights or measures or by falsification of documents or any other unjust use of the pen.

"This is the will of God that no man over-reach or circumvent his brother in business, because the Lord is the avenger of these things". (1 Thess 4:6). Even if goods belonging to another are in your keeping as agent, guardian, administrator or trustee, it is unjust to spend them, to waste or squander them. Taking or keeping what belongs to another is not made just because it has ceased to be regarded as dishonourable, because it is condoned by a section of public opinion, because it is regarded as sharp practice rather than full and complete dishonesty, because it can be cloaked so as to escape the full punishment of the law. It is unjust whether the owner is an individual, a company, a corporate body, or the State. Many who would scruple robbing or cheating an individual seem to have no scruple in robbing the State or a public body, or a company such as an insurance or transport company. In this matter the outlook of some of the people of our country is not sound. There are historical reasons for this outlook, but they are certainly not valid at the present time. There is now no valid reason for unscrupulousness with regard to property owned by the State, by corporate or associated bodies. Let those who are guilty in this matter not decide themselves. They are guilty of injustice. They will have to render an account to the just Judge.

PETTY THEFT.

There are some who would not think of grave injustice but who have no scruple about petty thefts. They continually steal or pilfer small amounts, or in business dealings they continually commit

small injustices. Petty thefts are not in themselves grave sins, unless a person has the intention of stopping only when a considerable amount has been taken.

In this case he sins grievously from the beginning, not on account of the quantity taken each time, but on account of the intention to steal a large amount. Even for petty thefts there is the obligation to restitution and this obligation certainly becomes grave when the thief has amassed a considerable amount by his thefts. In addition to being sinful, small thefts dull the conscience and prepare the way for grave sins of injustice. No one becomes suddenly wicked. No thief begins with a big theft.

EMPLOYERS AND WORKERS.

Masters are bound to pay the wages of their employees. "The labourer is worthy of his hire." (Luke 10:7). The refusal to pay wages, honestly earned, is one of the sins which cry to Heaven for vengeance. If the state of the business can afford it, they should pay their employees a living wage, that is, a wage which will enable a well-conducted and thrifty workman to support himself and his family in decency and reasonable comfort. The first charge on any business should be the provision of a livelihood for those who work in it — the master and owner included. Workers are in their turn bound in justice to work diligently and well, to give just and sufficient labour for the wages they receive, "not defrauding but in all things showing good fidelity." (Titus 2:10). They have the same obligation to give honest labour, to earn their wages whether the employer is an individual, a company, a public body or the State. The employees of the State are especially bound, because the public good is in question, to do their duty honestly and well, giving justice to all, rich and poor, without fear or favour, without regard to wealth, influence or position. The State also and all corporate bodies have their obligations of justice and restitution just as private persons.

UNJUST KEEPING.

As it is not lawful to steal, it is not lawful to keep stolen goods. It is not lawful to buy them. It is not lawful to buy goods which may be reasonably suspected to have been stolen. Such suspicion can arise by reason of the nature of the goods, the condition of the person selling them, or the low price asked for them. It is generally unlawful to buy from children without their parents' consent. There would not be so much injustice in the world if so many were not willing to buy or keep stolen goods. A person may say that if he does not buy them another will. In that case it is the other who sins, and who will have to make restitution. But even though goods have not been stolen, even though they have come into your possession by honest means, it is unlawful to keep them against the will of the owner. Loans and deposits must be paid back at the specified time. Things found must be returned to their owners. If a person finds an article and takes it into his possession he does not hereby own it. Finding is not a title to ownership. He is bound to return it to the lawful owner. If he does not know who is the owner, he must take reasonable steps to find out. The more valuable the property is, the greater the obligation to restore it, and the more careful and diligent should be the search for the owner.

The finder can demand compensation for the labour and expense of seeking the owner and taking care of his property.

The decent owner will show his gratitude in tangible form. But even if the owner is ungrateful, the property must be returned to him. It is his. He has the right to its possession. When there is no longer any hope of finding the owner the finder can keep it as his own.

DEBTS.

The chief way in which people may sin by unjustly keeping what belongs to another is by refusal to pay their debts.

The refusal to pay debts is not always regarded as dishonourable. It is not even regarded as unjust and sinful. The commonness of debt is an evil of our time. It is partly due to modern business methods, according to which payment is often made for goods delivered over a certain period and people are made used to owing. It is sometimes due to dealers urging people, whose credit is good, to take goods, and pay for them later on when they are able. Dealers should not urge goods on people unless they can pay for them then and there. A lifetime of debt is sometimes begun in that way.

There is also the system of easy payments which are by no means easy payments in the long run; as they include payment of interest, and usually high interest, as well as the principal. People going into debt may forget that as a rule they are paying interest on what they owe as long as they owe it. In most cases, if it were possible and feasible, it would be better for them to borrow the money at a definite interest and pay then and there for the goods they require.

They would at least know where they stand.

GOING INTO DEBT.

Some debts are necessary. They are made necessary by illness, sudden losses, unforeseen misfortunes. In the spring people have leave to go into debt to buy seeds and manures. They hope to be able to pay after the harvest. There must be a serious will and intention to pay such necessary debts. Others go into debt without necessity. It is not sinful if they are able to pay and seriously intend to pay. But it is most unwise. They are putting the first halter around their necks.

They are perhaps beginning to be debtors all their lives. Sin and, when the matter is grave, grave sin begins when people incur debts without the intention or the hope of paying them, when they are in debt and make no effort to meet their creditors' request for payment, or worse still, when instead of trying to pay what they owe, they contract new debts, adding load upon load to their consciences. Still graver injustice is committed when they deny their debts, if the creditor cannot enforce them, or when they seek the protection of the civil courts, and do not make a full and honest statement of their means. All these are the same as theft. They are less honourable than theft as in the case of theft the owner would take steps to protect his property.

PAYMENT OF DEBTS.

If you really cannot pay your debts you do not commit sin by not paying them. No one is bound to do what is impossible. Those who, through no fault of their own, are genuinely unable to pay deserve compassion and kind treatment. Their inability must be genuine. They must cut down their expenses to what is strictly necessary and try to put themselves in a position to pay. Many say that they cannot pay, but their inability is surely not genuine. They have money for everything else, for pleasure, for amusements, for holidays, for fine clothes, even for gambling and drink, even for vice. They deny themselves and their families nothing. They are better off in the eyes of the world, and more carefree in their lives than those to whom they owe, who are often at their wits ends to pay their way, because they cannot get what is owed to them. But it would be better and wiser for them to pay now. The day of reckoning is only postponed.

The golden rule is the rule of St. Paul: "Owe no man anything but to love one another." (Rom. 13:8). Be slow to go into debt. Pay if you can. Buy nothing unnecessary unless you can pay here

and now. If you must incur debts, make up your mind to pay them as soon as possible. Deny yourself all luxuries and all things unnecessary, until you have paid what you owe. Then you will feel happy and safe in conscience. You will feel independent. You can look the whole world in the face because you owe not any man.

UNJUST INJURY.

When a person steals or refuses to pay his debts he is enriching himself at the expense of another. But he can commit injustice without becoming any richer thereby, without deriving any profit from it, when he injures another in his property. The injury must be unjust and culpable, knowingly and deliberately committed. One may inflict injury on another by an act which is lawful and which one has every right to perform. This is not unjust injury. Unjust injury comes from an act which is unjust and unlawful in itself, and which one has no right to perform, such as injuring or damaging another's house, his lands, his crops or his fences. Deliberate malicious injury to private property, directly intended, is comparatively rare. Injury to property is more commonly committed by negligence, by leaving gates open, by carelessness of people with regard to property or vehicles entrusted to their care. If this negligence is gross and culpable, fully conscious and deliberate, there is an obligation to reparation of the injury done. In the case of State or public property there is sometimes no scruple in destroying or damaging it. There is often no thought of the injury done, no apparent realisation of the injustice committed. But the law which prohibits injury to the property of your neighbour, also prohibits injury to public property. The prohibition is no less grave because no single individual is injured. Public order and the public good are injured and this is more important than injury to individuals.

MANNER OF RESTITUTION.

A word about the manner in which restitution should be made. It should be made as soon as possible. If it is in existence, the stolen object should be restored. If consumed or destroyed its value should be restored. Loss suffered by the owner from being deprived of his property should be compensated. If the owner is dead restitution should be made to his heir's. If all cannot be restored, then as much as possible should be restored. If restitution cannot be made now, there should be a firm intention to make it if it is possible. The person bound to restore must do his best to make restitution possible. He is bound to put himself to inconvenience to do this, to inconvenience in proportion to the amount owed. If he makes no serious effort and is willing to suffer no inconvenience in order to make reparation, it is a sure sign that he has not a serious and genuine will to do so. The obligation to restitution is not removed because others are associated with the injustice. Not only those who do the actual injury and those who take or keep the stolen goods, but also those who knowingly and effectively help in the theft or injury as well as those who did not prevent it when they were bound by their office or position to do so have obligations to restitution. Lastly, if the owner is not now known or cannot now be found, goods unjustly acquired or their value must be given to charity or pious purposes. By the law of God no one is allowed to become rich on injustice.

PRACTISE HONESTY.

The rule for true Christians is to have a firm will to be strictly honest in all their dealings, to take nothing which belongs to another, no matter how small, to be more anxious to give in charity than to take in injustice. It is the first duty of a man and of a Christian to be strictly honest, to respect the rights of others, to give everyone his own. You must reject all covetous thoughts in the beginning.

This is so important that God has given us a special commandment—"you shall not covet your neighbours' goods" to save us from the beginnings of dishonesty, in our thoughts. Children should be taught from their earliest years to be strictly honest, to take nothing, however little, which does not belong to them. If this is continually urged on them in their childhood and youth, it will have an effect for their whole lives. Parents should teach them by example, by the honesty of their own lives. Children should not be allowed to take even the property of their parents without permission. The taking may not be very wrong, because the parents are not very unwilling, but it gives the children bad habits, which may last through life. Parents should practice economy, thrift and order in their lives, and teach these virtues to their children. By giving them these good habits they will help them to be always honest and independent.

REMOVE CAUSE OF DISHONESTY.

You must, if it is necessary, remove the causes of dishonesty. In addition to the covetousness of our fallen nature, which can be remedied with the help of the grace of God and respect for his law, there are, in these days, many causes of dishonesty. There is the longing for amusement and pleasure, the desire of worldly honours, position and influence, the desire for social position, to keep up appearances, to live a life of ease or elegance. There is the passion for spending, for squandering, for living above one's means. If you wish for the end, you must will the means. If you wish to abjure dishonesty you must also remove the causes. None of these causes are sufficient to excuse dishonesty. They may palliate the offence before men. They will not justify it before God. To give every one his own is a primary duty of man to himself, to his fellow men and to God. Until he does this he has no right to amusement, to social position or worldly grandeur. Those who are rich can be munificent. Those who are not should cut the cloth according to their measure.

GAMBLING AND DRINK.

Two causes of dishonesty deserve special mention, namely: gambling and drink. Neither are in themselves sinful when used in moderation and within the limit of one's means. But both have the same danger. They tend to become passions. They tend to make their addicts their slaves, to lessen their self-respect and their sense of honesty. They make them less reliable, less capable of honest endeavour. All should try to avoid the temptation to these vices, to resist in the beginning, not to let the habit grow upon them. When the habit is formed resistance is difficult and entails a long struggle to conquer it. People are tempted to both vices by the longing for excitement, by a false notion of legitimate recreation. A common occasion is idleness. In the past, boys were led to drink by occasions offered on days free from work, such as holidays (holy days) of obligation. We should return to the Catholic tradition and keep holy the holidays of obligation, closing all places of business and especially all public houses on these days. They are intended to be days of prayer and devotion, of rest and legitimate recreation, not days of dissipation during which the seeds of bad habits are sown. We should realise fully the dignity of labour, remembering the life of our Divine Lord who for our example took a worker for His foster-father and was Himself a worker, remembering also that willingness to work is an essential quality of true manhood and the root of all true self-respect and independence.

CONCLUSION.

"Some distribute their goods and grow richer, others take away what is not theirs and are always in want." (Prov. 11:24). Ill-gotten goods do not generally make a person rich. They go quickly. They lead to poverty. They bring unhappiness, and misfortune, on the dishonest person and if not on him,

on his house. The price will be paid even in this world before many generations have passed. “This is the curse that goes over the face of the earth... and it shall come to the house of the thief... and it shall remain in the midst of his house and shall consume it with the timbers thereof and the stones thereof.” (Zach. 5:5). No man can ensure the prosperity of his family by ill-gotten goods. “He that gathers together by wronging his own soul, gathers together for others, and another will squander all his goods.” (Ecclesiasticus 14:4). He cannot ensure his own enjoyment of them even for a day. By a single stroke of fortune he may lose all. Or the Lord may say to him: “You fool, this night do they demand your soul of you, and whose then shall these things be which you have provided?” (Luke 12:20). Even if, as sometimes happens, ill-gotten goods bring worldly success and happiness, honour, social position, power and influence, “what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?” Or “what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36-37).

There is no exchange worth while for the salvation of your soul. It is better to hearken to the earnest exhortation of St. Paul. “We entreat you, that you use your endeavour to be quiet, that you do your own business, and work with your own hands as we commanded you, and that you walk honestly towards them that are without and that you want nothing of any man’s.” (1 Thess. 4:11). By honest work and endeavour you may not always secure the riches of this world. You will secure the riches of eternity, the inexpressible reward of eternal life. May this reward come to you, and may the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, descend upon you and remain with you for ever.
